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ABSTRACT

The problem of children's misbehavior in school is an urgent concern. Although misbehavior is not unique to the school, the whole of society suffers from violence. It is important to recall that those committing crimes today were yesterday's students. There are two modes for discipline in the schools. The "established" mode aims for teacher control of children's behavior. This mode assumes that students cannot be trusted to pursue their own learning. In contrast, the "emergent" mode aims to help children assume responsibility for their behavior and to encourage them to think about the effects of their actions upon others. The underlying philosophy of the emergent mode is that human beings have a natural potential for learning. The emergent mode of discipline builds upon the ideas of Ginott, Glasser, and Gordon which stress the importance of good student-teacher communications for preventing problems, and teaching that irresponsible behavior is not acceptable. Gordon's "Teacher Effectiveness Training" is a good method for opening up student-teacher communication and for helping children accept personal responsibility for their actions. It is important for the schools to implement the emergent mode which requires children to take responsibility for their behavior so that they may become responsible citizens in a democratic society. (Author/BC)

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Improve Communication to Improve Behavior

By

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From a presentation at the Fifth National Conference on Humanistic Education, Carrollton, GA, April 29, 1978.

At the end of the seventies the problem of children's misbehavior in school is an urgent concern of almost everyone. Not only are teachers and parents worried about this phenomenon, but children and the general public, too, are anxious about the fact that assaults and rapes have increased alarmingly, many children are carrying weapons to school, drugs and alcohol can be found in nearly every junior high school and burglaries and vandalism are steadily rising in number. Increasing pressure is being felt by legislators and school boards to "do something about the discipline problem."

Educators feel obliged to point out that misbehavior is not unique to the school; our whole society suffers from violence and crime perpetrated by citizens ranging from the mugger and pickpocket to fraudulent corporate executives and high government officials. Even as we state this fact, however, we must recognize a related truth that all of those adults who are committing crimes today were only a few short years ago students in the elementary and secondary schools, and the attitudes and values they have today were for the most part developed while they were enrolled in school.

Any discussion of the discipline problems of children in school must include the recognition that the curriculum itself is of extreme importance in the overall cause-effect relationship. Space does not permit the exploration of that facet of the problem here, but the authors want it understood that we do not believe that any approach to school discipline can be

successful if the curriculum is one that fails to meet children's needs or diminishes their sense of self-worth.

Discipline Models

Having said that, we would like to turn our attention to the alternative models of discipline that have been used in schools as described by Laurel Tanner (1978). She divides the models into two modes, "established" and "emergent." The former includes the familiar training model which has been used by teachers for many years to develop automatic responses in children to their directions, as well as the newer behavior-modification model which attempts to do the same thing with the help of recent developments in behavioral psychology. Both of the established models aim for teacher control of children's behavior, whether children wish to be controlled or not.

The emergent mode attempts to keep responsibility for behavior with the child and to encourage him or her to think about the effect on others of alternative behavior choices. By choosing, the child develops values which will continue to serve as guides for behavior on into adulthood. The aim is not teacher domination of the child, but children becoming more responsible, with stronger values and more in control of their own behavior.

Carl Rogers has written about two distinct sets of assumptions in education that parallel the two modes of discipline Tanner described. He listed six implicit assumptions which are

held today by many educators and which can be paraphrased in the following way:

> The student cannot be trusted to pursue his own learning.
>
> What teachers present is what students learn.
>
> Factual knowledge built up from a solid base to higher levels is the aim of education.
>
> We know what is true.
>
> By keeping children passive we will develop creative, independent, active citizens who will be able to solve future societal problems.
>
> Evaluation is education; and education is evaluation.

Rogers then made a second list of assumptions which he believes will have to replace the above list if our society is to develop citizens who are not passive, closed, rigid, and disinterested in discovering new knowledge. His second list is approximately the following:

> Human beings have a natural potentiality for learning.
>
> Much significant learning is acquired through doing.
>
> Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is perceived by the student as having relevance for his own purposes.
>
> Learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process.
>
> Self initiated learning, involving the whole person of the learner - feelings as well as intellect - is the most pervasive and lasting.
>
> Creativity in learning is best facilitated when self criticism and self evaluation are basic, and evaluation by others is of secondary importance.
>
> The most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning, a

> continuing openness to experience, an incorporation into oneself of the process of change.

The training/behavior modification models of discipline are consistent with Rogers' first list and the emergent models are consistent with his second list. Possibly one reason the newer approaches have not been pursued more successfully, and by larger numbers of teachers, is that the older assumptions are nearly universal in today's schools, and it is difficult for teachers even to gain permission to try the emergent models. At least many teachers seem to feel restricted to the "tried and true" methods.

Emergent Models

The ideas of three men (the "three G's" - Ginott, Glasser and Gordon) dominate the emergent models today. Haim Ginott did not develop a "system" of discipline, but implicit in his writing are the emergent ideas outlined by Tanner. He wrote of the experiences of many teachers who were succeeding, and some who were not, in Teacher and Child (1972) and in his examples he illustrated the value of good communication between teachers and children. He also emphasized the importance of preventing problems before they occur.

William Glasser describes his "reality therapy" model in Schools Without Failure (1975) and emphasizes the point that moral behavior is necessary regardless of the reasons a child might have for acting otherwise - which he calls "irresponsible behavior." Through conversation Glasser confronts the child with his behavior and asks him to think about its effect on

others. He then helps the child make plans to eliminate such behavior in the future.

Glasser insists that regardless of the emotional background of the problem the child must learn that society will not accept irresponsible behavior, and he cannot use his problems as an excuse for it. He believes children can learn responsibility even if they have had very bad treatment at home and as a result have emotional problems.

Thomas Gordon's Teacher Effectiveness Training (1974) or "T.E.T." is a systematic method of solving problems involving active, empathic listening, congruent "I messages" and classic problem solving (identify the problem, generate possible solutions, evaluate and select a solution and test it out). TET involves communication as its dominant theme. Gordon stresses the importance of determining who "owns the problem" or who needs to be helped in a given problem situation. If the child is behaving in a way that irritates the teacher, it is the teacher not the child who owns the problem. If a child is afraid to pet the guinea pig, it is the child who owns the problem.

Having established problem ownership, the teacher knows which TET skills to apply. Active listening is for use when the child owns a problem, which involves listening carefully to the child's words in order to hear the feelings behind them, and then feedback to the child the feelings that have been identified. For example, "You are tired of math and you would like to take a rest now," lets the child know that he has

communicated his feelings accurately and the teacher cares enough to pay close attention to how he feels.

When the teacher owns a problem, Gordon suggests the use of an "I message" or a congruent statement that tells the child how he or she feels as a result of the child's behavior. The teacher might say, "When you wander around the room and talk to your friends during our discussion time, it keeps all of us from paying attention, and I am frustrated by that." Such a statement does not order the child to sit down or to keep quiet, but it clearly communicates the way his behavior affects the teacher, and it leaves the responsibility for change with the child.

When the child chooses to change his behavior in a way that solves the teacher's problem, both he and the teacher can feel good about it; it is not a triumph of one will over another. When the child chooses not to do that, however, the teacher may want to ask the child to sit down and "problem solve." Such sessions are usually productive of a solution acceptable to both persons involved, and again each can take pride in the solution.

Tables 1 and 2 present a comparison of two approaches to problem situations, along with the likely outcomes of each approach.

Communication Essential

The key to the emergent models is communcation. Teachers need the skills of empathic listening, congruent sending of messages and problem solving in order to make them work. They

Table 1. Alternative Approaches to Problem with Ruby

Problem Situation	Training	Communication
	Teacher Behavior	
RUBY Ruby is a fifth grade girl with very poor reading and language skills. She seldom tries to do her work and frequently creates disturbances in class. She seems eager to please the teacher on a one-to-one basis, but there is little carryover into her behavior in the group. Today, during a discussion of the art show to be held next week, Ruby made a number of rude comments loud enough to be heard by the children around her, and kept many of them laughing so that the discussion was totally disrupted. The teacher is frustrated and infuriated by Ruby's behavior today. He has kept his cool because he is aware of her many home problems which include an abusive father, but he wants her to stop this behavior and decides to have a private talk with her. She usually listens to the teacher and even tries to behave for a little while but it never lasts. The teacher really wants her to commit herself to eliminating this behavior from now on.	The teacher sets up a contract with Ruby after discussing with her the specific behavior changes they both want to see. A list of the specific behavior that will receive rewards is outlined by Ruby and the teacher. They decide what the rewards will be and a contract is drawn up with times for re-evaluation scheduled.	The teacher has a conference with Ruby which begins with the teacher telling Ruby how her behavior in class today affected both the teacher and the class and how he feels about it. The teacher then listens to Ruby's response and reflects her feelings back to her. Once the feelings on both sides are communicated, the teacher and Ruby enter into problem solving which results in a mutually agreed upon solution. Re-evaluation of the solution is scheduled for a few days later.
	Basic Assumptions	
	The student cannot be expected to control his own behavior without external rewards.	The student has the necessary ability to deal with his own problems and is motivated to do so out of respect for the teacher.
	Likely Outcomes	
	Ruby's behavior in this particular class improves as long as the rewards are meaningful.	As the dialogue between Ruby and her teacher continues, Ruby's feelings about her home situation are expressed, and she begins to accept responsibility for solving her own problems.

Table 2. Alternative Approaches to Problem with Matt

Problem Situation	Training	Communication
	Teacher Behavior	
MATT Matt is a very bright six-year old boy. He gets his work finished without effort and then bothers others in the class. During math today he completely disrupted the teacher's lesson on metrics by getting a whole group of boys into a sword fight with their rulers. The teacher is exasperated with Matt. She feels he is too bright a little boy to waste time and cause problems. She decided to do something.	The teacher develops a plan in which she will watch Matt closely and give him positive reinforcement when he is doing his work. If he begins disruptive behavior she will positively reinforce others who are on task in order to keep the group together with her and not following Matt into mischief.	The teacher tells Matt that she is very frustrated when he plays around in math class because she can't help the other children learn. When Matt responds by telling her that he already knows that stuff, she active listens while Matt expresses his feelings about being bored. As a result of the interchange, they arrive at a solution to the problem which includes more advanced math for Matt, and a list of alternatives, such as puzzles for Matt to work on when he is finished.
	Basic Assumptions	
	The teacher is responsible for controlling behavior.	The teacher and the student are equal participants in solving classroom problems.
	Likely Outcomes	
	Matt's behavior will probably improve temporarily but his basic problem of being bored has not been recognized or solved.	The teacher will change her approach as a result of understanding Matt's problem so that Matt can be working independently and does not have to sit through lessons he does not need.

also need to understand misbehavior as the child's attempt - however misguided - to meet his or her legitimate needs. For example, the child who steals pencils from other children may have a real need for attention and love from his peers and teachers. The need is legitimate; only the means to get that need met was disruptive. The permanent, long range solution to the problem is two-fold; first, the school must meet his legitimate needs in positive ways so that he will not have to get them met through misbehavior, and second, he must be taught responsible ways to get his needs met in the future.

Through the use of I messages teachers can not only improve children's behavior but they can give themselves immediate relief of anger producing feelings by expressing them in a congruent way. By telling a child the true feelings the teacher is experiencing at the moment, whether it be frustration, anxiety, worry or any other identifiable emotion, he or she becomes less tense and upset. If the child responds by apologizing or changing his actions in a positive way, as is usually the case, this relaxation of tension becomes a warm glow of affection for the child who only seconds earlier had seemed to be the cause of the teacher's problem.

A starting point to restructure classrooms and schools, and in the process eliminate some of the problem behavior, might be to carefully examine Rogers' two lists of assumptions to see whether or not a given school faculty could endorse the second set.

Simultaneously teachers and administrators will need to learn through study and practice the kinds of communication skills described above and children and parents will need to be taught the same skills for use both at school and at home. When adults and children communicate in a congruent way, they do not try to control each other, and the instances of misbehavior become less frequent and less serious. Both children and teachers (administrators and parents, too) find their legitimate needs being met and their feelings toward each other becoming more positive.

A democratic society cannot afford to use control techniques with chilren that take responsibility for their behavior away from them. Americans are counting on their young to become highly responsible citizens who will preserve their heritage of freedom and democracy and they must take care that every official action of the school is consistent with that goal.

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